MIDEAST MADNESS: P.J. O'ROURKE ON THE WEST BANK

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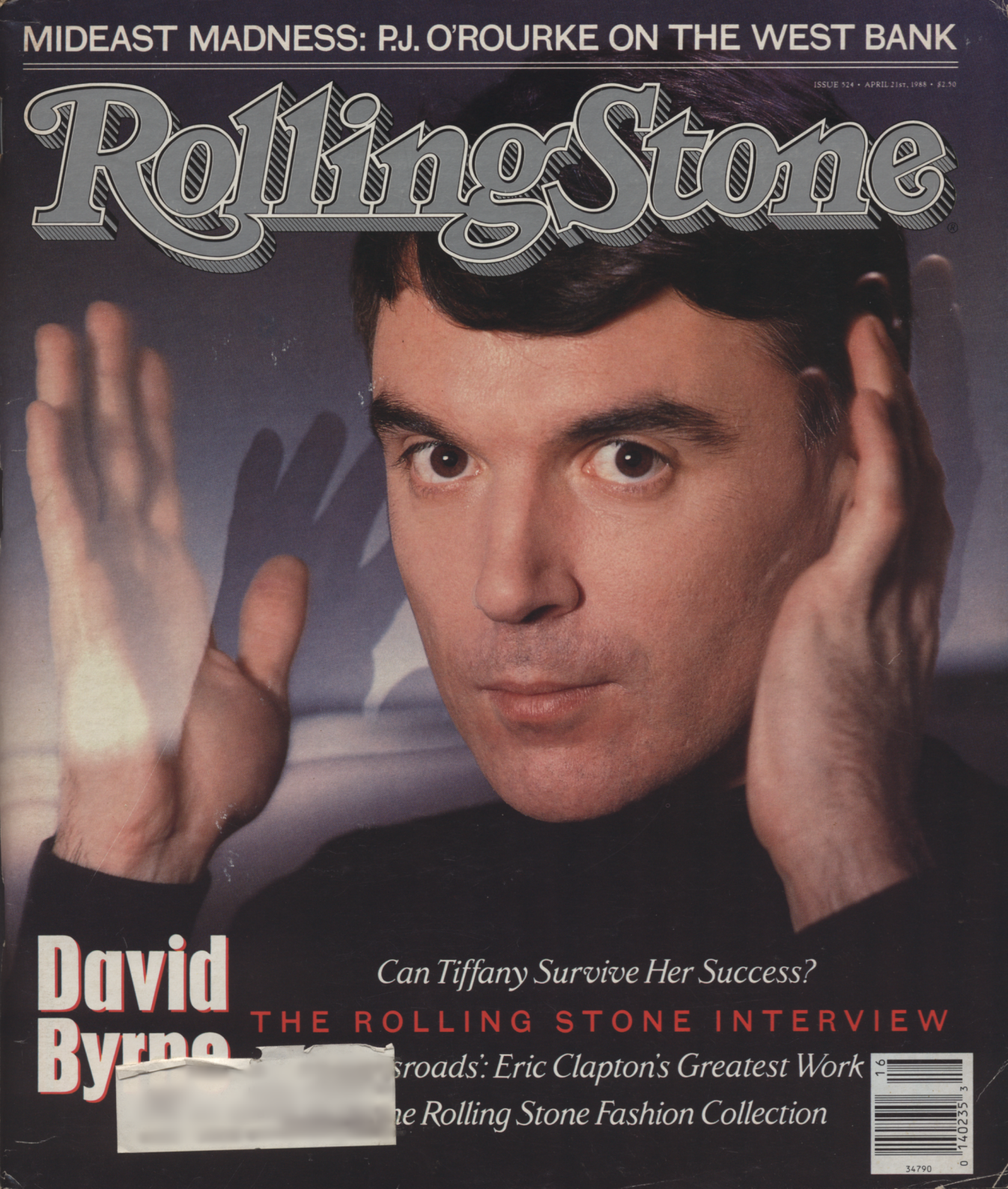

David Byrne

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DAVID BYRNE

The Rolling Stone Interview

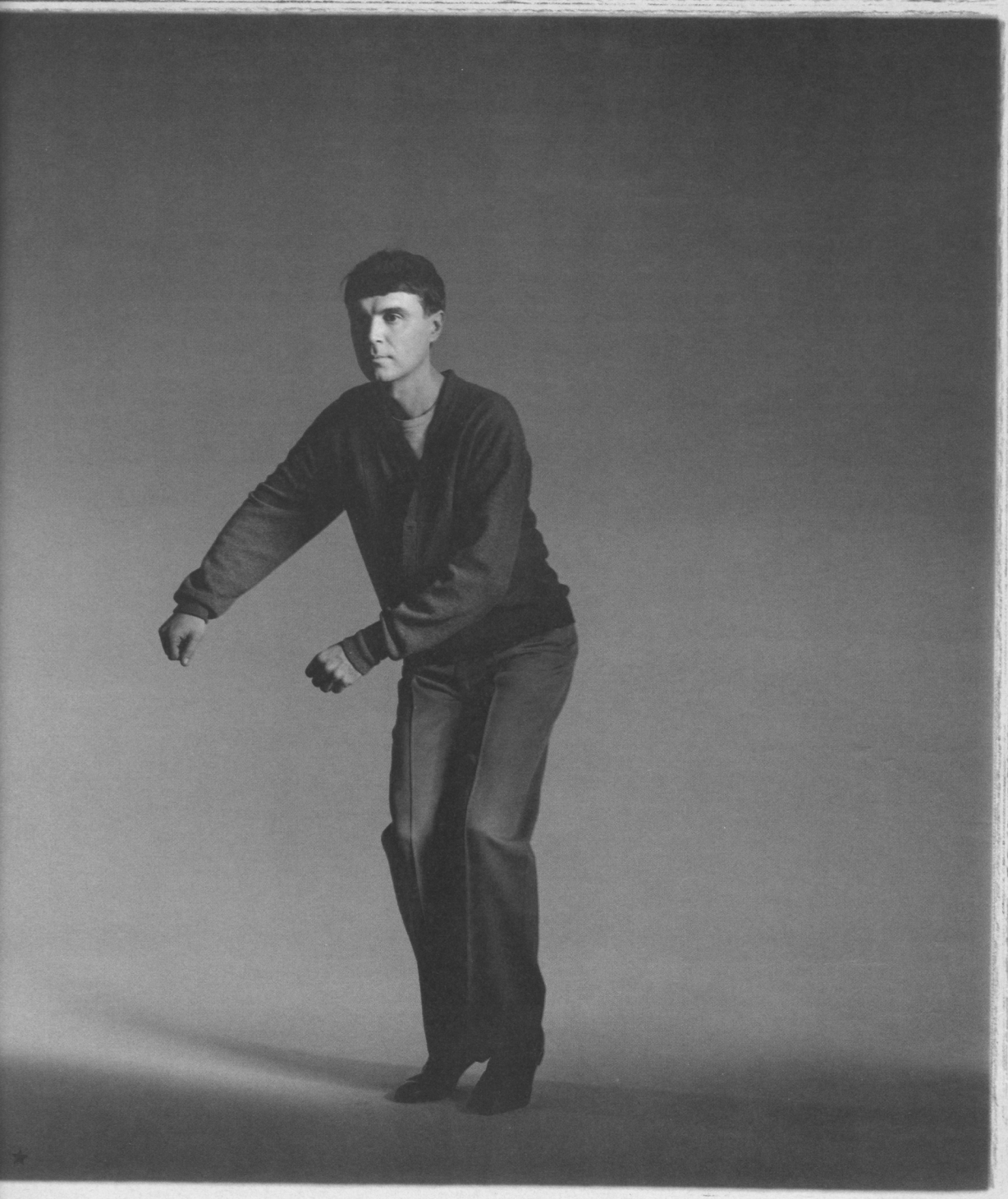
By Robert Farris Thompson

Photograph by HIRO

IN 1980 A REPORTER FOR A LOS ANGELES NEWSPAPER called to tell me that Talking Heads had mentioned my book *African Art in Motion* in the press kit for their album *Remain in Light*. She wanted to know my reaction. Since I had already been tuned in to the Heads' innovative takes on rock music, I told her I was intrigued. And I was. I began to track the group's music more closely. I was especially impressed by the Afro-Atlantic excursions – *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (with Brian Eno) and *The Catherine Wheel* – by the band's singer and chief songwriter, David Byrne.

In the spring of 1987, I met Byrne for the first time. Jonathan Demme, who had directed *Stop Making Sense*, Talking Heads' concert film, invited us both to dinner at a café on Manhattan's Upper West Side. David came dressed immaculately in white, appropriately evoking the image of an American initiate into the Yoruba religion. Throughout that first conversation, Demme and I did most of the talking: we were waxing poetic about Haitian *vodun* (*vo-dun*, not *voodoo*, is the respectful way to refer to this much-maligned African-rooted religion). But I could see that David genuinely dug Haiti and her arts.

Several weeks later, I invited him to accompany me to a Haitian *vodun* initiation ceremony. It was a *canzo*, a ceremony in which two blacks and two whites (one was an administrative assistant for a major magazine) would pass the fire test, holding their hands briefly in a scalding-hot mixture without feeling anything, as proof of self-control and oneness with the spirit. The successful completion of the *canzo* would be celebrated with dancing and spirit possessions.



African music seemed a way out of the dead end that Western culture has gotten itself into.'

The dancing was scheduled for five in the afternoon in a basement *hounfor* ("shrine") in the Morrisania area of the Bronx, not far from the George Washington Bridge. We arrived on time, but the ceremony didn't get under way until nearly four hours later. David passed this impromptu initiation test. Instead of stirring restlessly or pointedly glancing at his wristwatch, he simply plunked himself down in a chair and watched a television that someone had left on. Around nine, the drummers finally came and set up, and the rhythms for the gods resounded. Several women and one man became possessed by the gods and goddesses of ancient Dahomey, in Africa. Ghede, one of the most powerful deities, came down in the flesh of a woman and – wham! – fell right into David's lap before lunging ecstatically to the altar. David hardly blinked an eye. It was as if the intense non sequiturs of his songwriting – not to mention the unpredictability of rock stardom – had prepared him well for this kind of experience.

Other outings with David in Afro-Latin New York have confirmed, for me, that he has an abiding connection with the arts of the black Atlantic world. At a New York jazz club called Carlos I, for example, I've seen David in the audience, righteously rocking along with Ayizan, a New York Haitian band that plays the one-note bamboo trumpets of Haiti over rock and jazz. I've also realized from these encounters that David is always "on." He knows how to dress, move, sit, gaze – how to augment, with gesture and attitude, any given creative context. I would guess that when he switched from studying art to performing music, he carried the insights of line, form and color to the world of grooves and silences. But also, wherever he is, whatever he is doing, he is on in the ethnographic sense of being a participant-observer.

One night at S.O.B.'s, the New York nightclub specializing in African, Brazilian and Caribbean black music, Celia Cruz, the queen of salsa, invited David onstage to play guitar for her. It was, of course, an exciting minievent for the performers and the audience. But David Byrne, the musician-ethnographer, was also there, and he was on. That night he met Angel Fernandez, Cruz's trumpet player, and commissioned his talents as an arranger. Consequently, "Mr. Jones," a brilliant cut on the new Talking Heads album, *Naked*, swings with the kind of classic horn lines made famous by the Cuban mambo king Perez Prado; it cleverly complements the Afro-Cuban sounds and rhythms that percolate throughout the rest of the record.

I've also learned that David's love affair with these cultures is not only sincere, it's pervasive. The conversations from which this interview is taken would usually start at a New York restaurant and wind up at Byrne's home, a loft in SoHo, where he lives with his wife, Adelle Lutz, a Eurasian designer. The loft's outside corridor is guarded by two *drapeaux de vodun* ("vodun flags"), which salute the deities Bossu and Erzulie. In the living room, the sofa is draped with a multicolored Akan *kente* cloth. To the side of a state-of-the-art television is a table set with several miniature wedding couples frozen in a dance of love over a *bogolanfini* cloth from western Africa. There is also a wooden Nimba statue, a striking feminine image from the Baga people of Guinea, and an amazing fusion sculpture – with David doing the fusing – made of a cake studded with red power figures purchased in a *botánica*, a Yoruba-American herbal store. Of course, not all of the accents are African or Afro-American. The bedroom area, with its translucent sliding walls, is Japanesque. And although Byrne has very hip, up-to-date catalogs of African, Afro-Brazilian and North American visionary art on his coffee table, his current john literature is an important work on film theory by Jay Leyda.

So one could say that David Byrne is nowadays as much ethnographer as he is rock artist. All of these interests propel him more and more into the making of film. (The *vodun* sequence in his first film effort, *True Stories*, foreshadows his next big project, a film on the Yoruba religion in Brazil.) All his imperatives seem to be blurring, one into the other, and probably just in time. The continuing upsurge of black-based popular musics – such as reggae, *compas direct*, mambo, merengue, *cadence*, zydeco – which is being reinforced by hyper-tech, means that we are going into a new era. Put it this way: I think David Byrne points the way to the future, when rock masters will be noted for extraordinary acquisitions of multiple cultures in sound. Those who deny the trend probably don't know a computer sample from the proverbial hole in the ground.

"Mr. Jones," on *Naked*, is a kind of declaration of independence for all these tendencies and more. It's an answer back to Bob Dylan's "Ballad of a Thin Man," which has the immortal lines about Mr. Jones. That song made a fetish of being snobbish toward out-of-it elders and beer-drinking, football-loving America. Now Byrne is saying that Mr. Jones is back, and he's okay. Which is good news for us "office buffaloes" (one friend's term for the straight and gainfully employed) who love reggae and *soucous* and salsa as much as we love rock.

Let those who never thought culture stopped at the Hudson, who never thought it was only happening in English, cast the first stone at David Byrne and mock his work as patronizing. They're missing the point. There is something happening out there, and it's Señor Jones (Willie Colón, Ray Barretto, Roberto Roena), Señora Jones (Celia Cruz) and, in Portuguese, Senhora Jones (Denise Delapenha, Gal Costa, Alcione). It's also Monsieur Jones and his Haitian colleagues (Ayizan, Troupe Makandal, Coupé Cloué), who will one day be to New York what the Mississippi Delta bluesmen were to Chicago. The showdown music for the showdown decade of the 1990s is already here. And David Byrne not only hears it, he makes it. He's keeping up with the Joneses – the right ones.

When were you first turned on to African music?

I think it must have been around 1978. I heard a South African jive instrumental record, something I picked up in a record store. I had no idea what it was.

What was it about that record that turned you on?

It was that I heard elements of sounds that I was sort of familiar with. I heard a little bit of Cajun, a little bit of Caribbean – gosh, what else? It was just something different. I guess I might've heard Fela before that. But the South African jive and Fela's Afro-beat were close to the R&B that I was already familiar with, so it was kind of an easy entry.

It seems you and Brian Eno opened up that area of exploration for other rock artists, like Peter Gabriel and Paul Simon.

Well, I'd rather not get into who did what first. I know Peter Gabriel was doing something around about the same time, but it had a different flavor.

What moved you to incorporate these new elements into your own music?

At first, it was probably just instinct. I liked it. Later on, when I started breaking the beats down and putting them back together again, I saw how African and Afro-American songs were put together in similar ways. I saw there were social parallels to the music and a kind of sensibility and philosophy and even metaphysics that's inherent in the way the music's constructed and the attitude in which it's played. Then I started to understand *why* I liked it. And it seemed to me a way out of the dead end, the one-sided philosophical binder, that Western culture has gotten itself into.

Back in '79 and '80, when we were doing that, a lot of people thought, "Oh, did you go to Africa?" And they were surprised to find out that we hadn't – and I hadn't – and still haven't really. I'd love to, but I just haven't. But I think what happened was we'd found that the same sensibility existed right next door. There were American musicians playing from the same foundation. As different as the styles are in Paris, for instance, there's still a lot happening here.

Paris is where you recorded most of the new album, 'Naked,' working with a host of African musicians. What kind of relationship did you have with them?

It was very relaxed. It didn't seem exotic. It was very natural and comfortable. In 1979, 1980 or whenever, when we were first playing around and trying to learn some other kinds of things, I think we really felt like students then, although we were often feeling our way on our own. But now I think that there's less of that relationship and more of a direct interplay. Everybody learns from everybody else and whatnot.

What about the Afro-Americans you've worked with?

Bernie Worrell and Alex Weir and Steve Scales, all those guys, we were learning a lot from them. Bernie's a kind of philosopher; something that would take me a page to say, he can say in a couple of words and hit the nail right on the head. Like his general attitude of playing with other musicians: you know, listening to what the others are playing and leaving spaces for each other, instead of everybody getting in their own seat of the car and then driving off.

You made your first African-influenced music with Brian Eno. What was the nature of that relationship? Was he both mentor and collaborator?

We first met him in London, and we'd hang out with him whenever we were there. This was all before we'd made any records together. So it kind of evolved in a very organic way, in the same way that when Talking Heads first got together, we weren't getting together because any of us were virtuoso musicians. We just

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Even us white kids who grew up on rock have a common link with Kongo rhythms.'

kind of got along as people, and music was the way we could work together. Then we started getting into some stuff that had other beats in it, that kind of thing. I know, for him [Eno] and me, it was a shared interest and enthusiasm. We were friends, and we'd exchange tapes. I'd have a tape of something from Africa, and so would he, without any idea of doing something with it but just saying, "Have a listen to this; you might like it," or vice versa. And pretty soon, you know, we realized that something's happening here.

Do you think that this openness – with Eno and all the guest musicians – is the source of strength that's kept Talking Heads together for more than a decade?

That's a big part of it. Once we established that we weren't gonna always stick to one thing – although we always kept it more or less within a song framework – it was wide-open; it was almost like you could do anything. So it's pretty hard to get bored. Yeah, that would be a good reason we could continue.

You're obviously very protective of your privacy. Are you also attracted to the romantic image of the lone artist, or do you prefer being part of the extended family of a band like Talking Heads?

Well, I really love working with other people, whether it's the band or whether I'm working on a film or a video or whatever. In my creative endeavors, it's the most enjoyable. But I don't know – I just don't hang out with a whole entourage or anything like that all the time.

A lot has been made of your preoccupation with alienation. What do you think of that?

I certainly find it kind of exaggerated. I think it's probably true in some of my material. To me, songs like "Road to Nowhere" are about surrender, not alienation. Maybe people are taking the words apart from the music. That's a possibility. Or they isolate my body language or the tone of my voice without looking at it as a whole. It's like, in terms of African sculpture, most people look at a sculpture that's got 100 nails driven into it, and they go, "Oh, my God, what a horrible demon." What can you say? It's a reflection of their own sensibility. The thing is acting as a mirror.

They miss the moral judgment in that mirror. Speaking of subjective perceptions, there's also a popular view of David Byrne as a rather cool and detached performer.

I sometimes find it disturbing or unfortunate. My intention has always been for the musical structures or the stage performance or even the lyrics to acknowledge their structure, to kind of let you see how they're put together. Maybe for that reason people find it detached. But my intention has always been to have a lot of feeling in it. When I was perceived as detached or whatever, I often took that to be a criticism, and thought, "Well, how can I improve what I'm doing, what the band's doing, so that that's not the case?" I think that the *Stop Making Sense* movie made it pretty obvious that if that was the case at one point, it wasn't the case anymore.

You've definitely turned in some wild performances. Do you see performing as a means of releasing your passion?

I suppose it is, but it's more complicated than that. Maybe in the early ones it had to do with passion, which is, in its simplest form, an emotional outburst. But the later stuff became more about a sense of community and the whole catharsis that came from injecting some of your individuality into a group and getting something bigger back. And that's a very different kind of passion from the passion of somebody screaming in your ear.

At an ideal level, do you think the performance of rock could become a form of religion for you, and even for the audience?

Yeah. I mean, that's true. But like any religion, it always has the danger of becoming – oh, what's that Zen saying about pointing at the moon and mistaking your finger for the moon? There's always the danger of mistaking the thing in front of you for what's behind it.

Is this implied religiosity bound up in your fascination with TV and radio preachers and gospel singers [in "True Stories"] and the Afro-Atlantic religions?

Yeah, I think all of those involve performances with real passion in them. Or the kind of passion where in many cases I can see a parallel with musical performances, where one loses oneself, that kind of thing. Even the TV evangelists who are probably completely jive – they might be just going through the motions, but I think some of the people in the audience, the congregation, are not.

What were your childhood religious experiences? You were born in Scotland.

Yes. And my parents.

Where in Scotland?

It's above England.

Oh, yeah! You turn left at Liverpool. No, I mean, where "in" Scotland?

Oh. Dumbarton. It's near Glasgow.

What was your parents' religion? What were you brought up as?

Let's see. They would go to church, and it was – what was it? It was either Presbyterian or Methodist. Something like that; it was along those lines. I kind of lost interest when I was a teenager. It's a pretty dour kind of spirituality. Then, being transplanted to the States, you're confronted by this incredible variety of spirituality, and some of it is very physical and very passionate in a really obvious way, which was very different from that. So that was an eye-opening experience.

One of your Celtic cousins, Van Morrison, was able to combine his religious passion with rock & roll.

Yeah, he went straight to R&B and found a common thread between R&B and Celtic spirituality.

And now you're investigating the Afro-Atlantic religions. You've studied Haitian vodun and Cuban and Brazilian orisha [Yoruba deities]. What do these religions mean to you?

I only have a rudimentary knowledge of them at the moment, but I think the first thing you discover is that they are benign, they're healthy. They're not some kind of creepy cult that's casting spells. That's kind of the first thing you discover, that the preconceived or stereotyped notions are basically wrong. After that, what you do with it is up to you, I guess. I don't know where to go with it from there. I mean, one thing I want to find out is if – as they would say in some TV commercial – it touches the parts that the other ones miss.

Artistically, you notice that this is the route where a lot of music and sensibility and attitude finds its way into pop music and popular culture. So it's a pretty natural thing to want to find out where all this came from: Let's get back to whatever it is.

Do you think that America at large can learn from these religions?

Oh, yeah. Of course, in a way I think it filters in through music and speech patterns, all kinds of ways, even without people knowing that it has its roots in Africa. I mean, rock & roll probably owes as much to that tradition as it does to country & western and anything else. So it's already in there, and it's already had, and probably will continue to have, a big influence. It's just a question of how much it's acknowledged. And that's maybe where things will change.

The strong part about that kind of spirituality is that a lot of it is improvised. Because of that, it can mutate into something that has a direct bearing on contemporary life in America. It doesn't have to remain as something exotic.

So you think rock & roll will fuse more deeply with the spirit of Afro-Atlantic religions?

Well, they all come from the same roots, which is where the hope lies. Even us white kids who grew up on rock & roll have a common linkage with rhythms from Kongo, and the *orisha* are not as distant as they might seem.

I hear you. Eshu-Elegba, as the god of the crossroad blues. Ogún, out there with the heavy metal. And Obatalá, god of creativity, would march with the digital samplers.

I don't know if it was in one of your books, but there was a photograph of a man who was being possessed by – is it Ogún? And he was smoking a cigar, and he had very "bad" body posture. I thought, "This is very rock & roll body attitude."

Well, rock comes from blues. Blues comes from work song. Work song comes in part from Kongo. But how do you define rock & roll, and where do Talking Heads fit in?

This guy named Timothy White said that rock delivered a personal truth. That the musician and the singer were delivering a personal truth to the listener. In that sense you could say that reggae is the rock & roll of Jamaica because it performs the same function: it delivers a personal truth. That's a nice, broad definition. But I tend to think of rock & roll as being a specific musical form: Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis Presley and Eddie Cochran, who were blues based and embodied a kind of attitude – body attitude and stance. Now that's a much narrower definition. If you take that definition, then a lot of what Talking Heads have been doing is outside of that tradition, trying to break out of it. But if you take the broader definition, then we're in, we're inside the definition.

When did you get hooked on rock & roll?

I think it was in my teens, when a lot of us felt that rock was a very direct kind of communication and not just music. There was also a lot of visual things that went along with it, a lot of the things that were making very direct connections and bypassed any need for translation. For me it was stuff in the mid- and late Sixties, which happens to have been the time when I first heard certain things. And I think it was just the sound. Sometimes the words would be good, but it almost didn't matter.

I tend to think of the pop music I grew up with as communicating through texture. The Miracles, the Temptations and the Byrds were pretty separate kinds of things, but to me it all had the texture of bells ringing; it sounded very metallic, like ringing metal. Which is what it was: striking the strings. You'd think of a pleasant sound as coming from a violin or something softer. And here was all this clanging!

Where were you picking up on it?

In the bedroom, you know, on the radio. And then I'd go to local dances.

Where did you hang out in Baltimore?

At that time, it was called a teen center. I think it was one of the school cafeterias. Then, in the evenings, there was this place where local bands played. Kids my age would sometimes, you know, drink more than they should have [*laughs*].

Let's review some Talking Heads songs. How about "Psycho Killer," from 'Talking Heads: 77'?

This song is about the psycho killer's mental state. It's not about a violent act. It's about how he imagines himself and how he feels. Tina [Weymouth, Talking Heads' bassist] was most involved in the French; her mother is French. I talked to her about what kind of thing I wanted it to say, and she came up with the words. There's a little Otis Redding in there, too.

"I Zimbra," from 'Fear of Music'?

To tell you the truth, I couldn't think of words, in this instance, that beared repeating. A lot of the music was based on some African records I'd been listening to. The melody came from Brian [Eno], and he noticed that this dada poem fitted the melody. It's a dada sound poem – poems that were meant to be read aloud. The dadaists were doing the same thing we were doing: trying to get behind the language to the meat of the expression. It was all in the sound of what was being said.

"Once in a Lifetime"?

This is one of the songs where you do a cinematic jump cut, an abrupt transition from one sensibility to a completely different one. Then you put the two next to one another, and they play off one another. In this case, the man was bewildered: Where and how did I get here? And in the chorus this same man seems to have found blissful surrender coming out from under water, water washing over him – blissful surrender in the Islamic sense.

Now let's try some riffing, a bit of call and response, starting with God.

Oh, my goodness.

You said at the outset that you wanted to deal with deep, metaphysical questions. Here they are. How do you envision God?

Well, I certainly don't believe in an old bearded man up there. I see God as a force that guides and unites our finest actions and sensibilities. We might call it God because we have no other way of explaining it. And it doesn't fit causal rationality, where you say, "Well, this happens, and that causes this, and this causes that." It's a more poetic reality.

How would God operate through the medium of rock & roll?

It's the principle that unites all the elements: the text and the sound, the rhythm and the attitude. It's an immediate understanding. I've spent years and years trying to put it into words, but the basic understanding comes in an instant.

The fact of it being kind of an epiphany still remains unexplained. I'm not trying to be mystical, but they could be within ourselves. They could be, you know, Jungian things, collective-unconscious archetypes. That kind of rationalizing of it is something I can accept more easily than deities that are out there and separate from us.

I once listened to Chet Baker, in a West Side jazz boîte, and in a certain phrasing of his trumpet, I thought I heard heaven. Have you had a similar epiphany?

[*Laughs*] Yeah. Sometimes I come upon a lyrical phrase, a key to unlock the words to fit a song, and the initial reason for it defies rational analysis. Yet in retrospect it makes perfect sense. Other times, in concert, where all the musicians are playing, and you kind of subsume yourself and become part of the community of musicians. They, in turn, become part of the audience. And everybody senses that. It's not a rational realization. It's a visceral realization that you're part of a larger whole.

In the heat of activity, the vision comes and . . .

That's the whole dilemma about the little sparks that result in creation. It's hard to attribute them. They kind of come from the spaces in between people.

What about the devil?

I have a lot of trouble with that concept. It's so powerful – not the devil, but the concept of evil. It's so powerful, but I haven't been able to come to terms with that. I think I persist in thinking that what we might call evil, or the devil or whatever, is people just not listening to themselves. That might be naive. But I persist in having this optimistic view.

What did you think of the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil"?

I took it as kind of raising a question about the potential for becoming disconnected from the energy source or whatever, becoming disconnected from yourself. That potential is in all of us. That's what I thought the song was about, that Mick Jagger and the Stones were saying it's not something *out there*. It's in us and everywhere, so have respect for it.

Hating and falling in love.

Sometimes they're mirror images. They're both obsessive states. They're two sides of the same coin. That's why the lover scorned, or the suspicious lover, can turn into a really vindictive person.

Do you think we learn from daring to go through the obsessive state?

Yeah, yeah. Learning that you can do that is respecting things outside the rational. Respecting things outside of daily living.

Rock & roll is an obsessive state. You dared to enter into that obsessive state. What kind of insights have you gotten from it?

Rock music makes the obsessive okay and turns it into a creative act. Rock deflects that energy and channels it into something creative. Which is odd, because at a certain point you realize that it's not enough to just be obsessive in front of an audience. There's also craft to it. You have to achieve a balance between obsession and craftsmanship. Otherwise, you're just screaming in somebody's ear.

What about the phrase on that Texas-mineral-water bottle at dinner: "Partake, enjoy, proceed."

Elizabethan Africanism! [*Laughs.*]

Yeah, Elizabethan Africanism: that's rock & roll! But if that's rock & roll, how do we partake in joy and proceed through this medium that links you with Elvis and U2 and Linda Ronstadt?

[*Laughs*] Could you ask the question another way?

Okay. Partaking, enjoying and proceeding – is this the gist of rock?

Boy, in three words, it's the whole message of the music.

We clearly enjoy and partake of rock. But proceeding – that seems to be the critical word.

To proceed is to take your own initiative. It's kind of like we've done *our* bit, now translate it into your own terms and go ahead with it.

There's going to be a lot of that in the Nineties, when digital equipment will make it possible for the man in the street to seize the purest sounds from any scene and make his own creation.

It's just amazing what can happen that way. It carries one step further the idea of splicing together different cultures – words, phrases, textures, everything. With a kind of technical perfection, anything can be mixed right in with anything else, somewhat like this fabric. You get this massive rhythm going, and it's bigger than any song or musical entity.

Fabric? You mean this kente cloth that I'm seated on?

Yes. And reading things you've written about the musicality of African fabrics and textiles, it was an affirmation for me. So when I saw it [the cloth], I just thought, "This is obvious: this is a score." Like when modern composers, like John Cage, were abandoning the staff notation and seeking notations that are more direct.

But what else do you think is going to happen to rock in the 1990s?

Rock's probably going to go two ways. There will be music from many cultures that crosses the generations, that speaks to the greater humanity that we are. That's one kind of thing. And I think we and other musicians are searching for a way to do that. We're certainly not alone. And I think, at the same time, there will always be younger musicians who have a more frantic set of hormones rushing through the body.

What kind of hormones?

A more *frantic* set. They're going to be saying that we're irrelevant. And they'll have something more immediate and more energetic, more of the moment, to contribute. I think that's inevitable. It's about time for that to happen again.

Let's talk about love, about which you can't talk too much. The late poet Marianne Moore essentially defined it as taking responsibility for somebody else's happiness.

And feeling that it's absolutely linked with your own.

One journalist noted that your songs changed noticeably after you fell in love with your wife.

That assessment seemed too pat to me, too simple. Seems to me there were other factors involved. But it

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would also be stupid of me to deny that my creative work wasn't affected.

When you're out there wildcatting on the frontier of love, how do you play with sexual fire in your lyrics without getting burned? How do you write about love without getting mawkish?

That's it. It's a real challenge to not bring it down to sentimentality. It took me a long time to feel I could jump into that, because it's dealt with so much in popular songs in a very saccharine way. Often those saccharine sentiments have a strong impact. Nobody's immune to it. But I felt other people were covering that; they had that part covered. I thought I should try to get to some of the other resonances of it – as if ripples were going out from this intense feeling that everybody has, but only certain parts of it have been touched.

How about this line from "The Great Curve," from 'Remain in Light': "The world moves on a woman's hips."

Oh, boy. I'm not talking about one particular woman. I'm not talking about my girlfriend [*laughs*]. You think that's very down and earthy, but I was talking about something metaphysical. That a gesture can resonate outward, like ripples in a pond, causing realms of meaning. An attitude of the body can embody a whole world view [*laughs*].

"This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)," from 'Speaking in Tongues'?

The most direct love lyrics that I've ever written. But I tried to do it in a way someone once described as a series of non sequiturs.

Like this one: "Sing into my mouth"?

I'd seen a picture of Eskimos singing. They'll sometimes sing into each other's mouths. I thought it was a most beautiful image.

Or "You got a face with a view."

It's romantic in the sense that romantic poets in the nineteenth century would write about a landscape. They'd write a whole poem about standing on the hill and looking out. I'm looking at her face and doing the same thing.

And finally, from that song, "Cover up and say goodnight" and "Hit me on the head."

[*Laughs*] When you fall in love, you feel like a missing piece of a puzzle that's been found. Plus, the epiphany of a love relationship is like being hit on the head, jolted into a different kind of a land.

What does the parenthetical phrase in "This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)" refer to?

We were deliberately playing instruments we weren't technically good at. Tina was playing guitar, Jerry [Harrison, the band's keyboardist] was playing the bass, and I was playing the keyboards. So our playing was very simple. We couldn't help but be naive.

"Creatures of Love," from 'Little Creatures'?

It came from a daydream, or a dream at night. I can't remember it very well now. But it had something to do with a couple making love. And when they were finished, there were little tiny people all over the bed.

A dream script?

Yes. Most of it's pretty straightforward, but there are a couple of mysterious things, like the "sleep of reason." It's like Rousseau or something.

What about these lines from the same song: "A man can drive a car and a woman can be a boss/I'm a monkey and a flower/I'm everything I want"?

That's where the lyrics of the song kind of jump-cut into something completely different for a while. I think it keeps the song from falling into a rut. It also helps throw the whole thing into a wider context, if you're lucky.

Explain "The Facts of Life," from 'Naked,' please.

The four of us had stumbled upon an interlocking improvisation. It was one of those numbers that started from one texture and evolved into another. And it became a challenge for me to write a melody that would bridge that transition in the music. It's almost like going from a factory to a pastoral landscape. Then I locked onto sex and procreation as being mechanistic. We're biological machines. Parents gave us our biological programming, from evolution. And it's monkeys. That's in-built into us. Not so bad, not so bad [*laughs*]. That's where a lot of good stuff comes from, but we're trying to deny it.

There are Asian as well as African influences in your work, and you contributed music to the soundtrack for Bernardo Bertolucci's film 'The Last Emperor.' Was your wife instrumental in any of this?

She turned me on more to the various theatrical forms over there, but I was pretty much already on my way. Appropriately enough, the big suit for *Stop Making Sense* came from a drawing I did on a napkin in Japan. We were having dinner with a clothing designer, and I was thinking out loud, saying, "We're going to tour again," and wondering what kind of clothing to wear onstage. And he said, "Well, you know what they say about the theater: Onstage everything has to be bigger." I said, "Okay, that's perfect." So, to me, the implied story of that whole show was of this man who frees himself from his demons and finds release and salvation in his big suit. He lives in the uniform of his job. And just like Mr. Jones, he manages to not let that constrain him. He can cut loose in this house made of a business suit.

"Mr. Jones"! Now that song struck me as the mambo revenge of Dylan's Mr. Jones.

Yes, I'm doing it the other way around. He's a traveling businessman, who's usually depicted in songs by people of my generation as not knowing what's going on. A lot of people would stare at Mr. Jones and declare him the ultimate square. I'm saying, "Okay, now, this guy's breakin' out of that, and he's havin' a good time."

You know, I think the whole generation-gap thing is unique in Western culture. In Japan, the generation gap is there, but it's very small. Here, we often just accept that the generations don't mix as much. Which is a big mistake.

But how would one mount an intergenerational Woodstock?

I don't know. Maybe *that's* what's coming in the Nineties.

There's a song called "The Big Country" on 'More Songs About Buildings and Food,' and you wore a big suit in 'Stop Making Sense.' How about some big questions: What is your big goal?

One thing would be to do stuff that has serious underpinnings but is fun at the same time.

Big dreams?

I don't know. I don't have big, long-range ones.

Big demon?

I suppose that one is kind of outside of myself: dealing with business people and business stuff and that kind of thing, which I pride myself in being able to understand and deal with. I'm proud that I can, you know, that I have some measure of understanding of it, and yet I find that it always seems to be taking too much of my time.

Big regret?

Not that big. I regret that with *True Stories* we didn't put out a record with the cast singing the songs instead of me. They were written with other voices in mind, and to me the other people, like Pop Staples, did it much better than I did. I regret it never worked out to happen that way.

Big idol?

Yeah, but they would change all the time. Every few years there would be someone else. I never felt like one person had all the answers. They may have done some beautiful things, but it's that old Zen proverb: It's easy to mistake the person for the beautiful gifts they bring, or something like that.

Can you remember one or two of your idols? I think the sequence would be fascinating.

Hmmm. Gosh. I'd need a *big* listing. No, there's too many, and they really kept changing all the time.

Big obsession?

I guess I get obsessed by whatever project I'm doing. In retrospect, one can see a common thread, that maybe there's a common obsession or subject I'm not always aware of at the time.

Big break?

Oh, boy. Well, there's probably quite a few. One would be the first time you write a song and perform it with a musician or collaborate on a song and play it and it really works. I think the first song was "Psycho Killer." So that was a big breakthrough, like "Yes, we can do this." Another one was when we went from being a four-piece to however many it was – eight or nine. The first gig we played like that was in Toronto. That was something completely new for us. Everybody was energized, of course, and the audience was totally behind us. They could see that we were taking this huge risk, and they supported us in it.

Big love?

I don't know. You put some words together, and you look at it, and it's this new thing, and then it starts speaking back to you.

Of the new songs on 'Naked,' how does "Blind" speak back to you?

It's pure imagination, but it comes out of reading the daily paper. It's a cry of anguish. It's a man crying, rather than a woman. And I think it's directed at the authorities. Someone has been killed, or badly beaten, and someone else is looking out a window. Terrible things are happening, civil strife. It definitely goes beyond just lack of sight. The more it's repeated, the more references are implied and the more it resonates with all the meanings within [*Cont. on 116*]

There will always be younger musicians who will have a more frantic set of hormones.'

DAVID BYRNE

[*Cont. from 52*] that word or phrase. And you're asking yourself and the listener to be aware of all that.

"Big Daddy"?

It's kind of a little Tennessee Williams scenario.

You mean Big Daddy from 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof'?

But this story is from a woman's point of view. She's a young woman who wants to break free of Big Daddy and can't do it. It's not exactly the same guy but similar.

"The Democratic Circus"?

We're actually talking about the electoral process. To me, it's not a democracy as we imagined it. It's disillusioning in a way. But part of that might be because it's not what we would have hoped; it's not what we were led to believe it would be. I like the rain coming at the end, washing it all away, like blood [*laughs*]. We referred to the song as being a cha-cha.

"Cool Water"?

It's very dark, that song. It's a pretty bleak view of the end of life, of death. A lot of our stuff has been somewhat positive, but this one is pretty much the other side. Pretty bleak, but I think it would be silly to ignore it and to pretend it doesn't exist.

There's a kind of dirge with flutes. The image of the big cool water is like relief. But you can also drown in it.

"Mommy Daddy You and I"?

I would like to think that it's about all of us being immigrants of one sort or another, that we've all moved from one place to another, even if it's just that we move across town. There's a certain similarity to families that come up from Mexico, or the Okies that went to California, people who've come from Europe. Everybody's transplanted, even if it's just that at some point they have to make a life for themselves, you know? And think what is it they're going to do with it. I'm very happy with the lines, like "We're wearing our grandfather's clothes." To me, that meant not that you're just wearing old clothes but that you're part of a long line. That you're connected to your family, your ancestors. You're not just in a void. You're kind of a product of your ancestors and something else, but I can't think what.

I don't think it's something personal or autobiographical, but it reminds me of when you're a kid, riding in a car or a bus or train or whatever. And you doze off. And your head goes to the nearest shoulder.

Well, some final words on "(Nothing but) Flowers" and we'll call it a day.

On the surface, it's a pleasant kind of tongue-in-cheek thing of me talking about giving it all up, throwing everything away and going out to live in the forest or the woods or the jungle, whatever. I guess it's a very common wish – but for the moment not all that likely. ■

DANIEL JANZEN

[*Cont from 98*] We just need the money."

He is confident that well-informed people will support conservation. "Have you ever noticed that every house contains pictures, figurines and so on of flora and fauna?" he asks. "Humans are hard-wired to be sensitive to the natural world – to a stand of trees, moving mammals, red fruits and flowers. The forest is our most complex environment – much more so than New York City. Losing it would be like losing color vision. Just as music and art do, it relieves boredom and provides richness and intellectual stimulation. It makes life worth more."

Janzen's urgency about completing the fund raising and administrative groundwork for the G.N.P. seems partly motivated by his desire to hand the project over to the Costa Ricans, after which he'll go back to full-time biology. "Don't call me his fifth or sixth life," says Halbwachs. "There was a time when he had a house and two kids and mowed the lawn. Then he was part of the social experimentation of the Sixties. He was an independent biologist for a long time. Now he's very involved in a huge public project. Soon the G.N.P. can forget about him, and he can go back to science."

When I ask Janzen what his most rewarding moments as a scientist have been, he mentions a few eureka-type revelations, like the mega-fauna theory. But he is most enthusiastic about experiencing the annual onset of the rains. "The whole world goes from being dormant to being alive in two days," he says. "Suddenly you experience the sights, sounds, smells of zillions of species. The frog behind your toilet answers a chorus kilometers away." Halbwachs chimes in: "A sheet of iridescent green stars – fireflies – hovers absolutely silently a foot above the ground at night." "Around that lamp," Janzen says, pointing above his head, "would be a mass of termites so solid that you couldn't see the bulb. It's like the whole American spring condensed into forty-eight hours." Nodding, smiling, they speak as one person, linked by shared experiences few others can even imagine.

I wonder aloud if Janzen has ever been motivated by the transcendental, even religious, considerations that draw many to ecology. The idea amuses him. "There's no meaning to life other than trying to make it better for other people," he says. "I figured that out when I was ten. All I've ever wanted was to be really good at what I did." He points at the forest fading in the tropical dusk. "I want that to be there a thousand years from now," he says. "That's enough for me." ■

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